

## Nathan & Esther Pelz Holocaust Education Resource Center

A program of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation

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Pictured right:  
 Pinat Hatikvah, A Corner of Hope –  
 an outdoor space dedicated to life after the  
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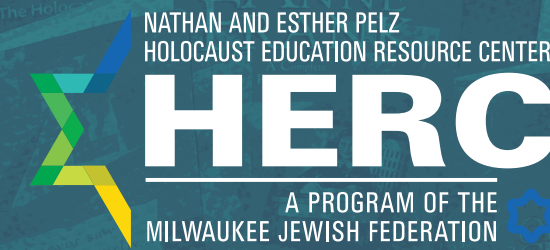
## Our Mission

The Nathan and Esther Pelz Holocaust Education Resource Center (HERC) is dedicated to building a better world, embracing diversity, and confronting racism and hatred by teaching the lessons of the Holocaust.



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## The Nathan & Esther Pelz Holocaust Education Resource Center

FALL 2019 NEWSLETTER

## Sam Gingold: Prints from the Warsaw Ghetto

By Julie Gorens-Winston



For the first six years of his life, Sam Gingold knew that so long as he stayed within the courtyard of his apartment building at 21 Wolynska Street, he would be safe. His father, Duvid, at 6'2", was proud that because of his stature and fluency in Polish, he had a coveted job usually reserved for non-Jews as a deliveryman for a seltzer water company, and he worked long hours, loading pallets of bottles onto his wagon, delivering seltzer water to Poles who lived outside the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw. He had his route, and he knew which streets to avoid so that he wouldn't be beaten. Sam had no books, and his toys were the pebbles he gathered from the courtyard and the discarded wheels he took from broken wagons. His clothes were handed down from the neighbors, mended and patched by his mother, Leah, and when Sam outgrew them, stitched together again to become the new garments for the next boy in line. The Gingolds were poor, but Sam didn't know any better. His parents doted on him, his neighbors watched out for him, and he was loved, protected and provided for.

When Sam was six, Duvid proudly presented Sam with his first real toy—a handmade scooter made from a discarded wood plank, sanded until it was smooth and fitted with wheels and ball bearings that his father had scavenged for and painstakingly assembled. Sam ran to his neighbor's apartment, grabbed his friend Josh, and the boys excitedly took turns riding the scooter around their courtyard. But the cobblestones in the courtyard were bumpy, and the scooter got stuck in the crevices, so the boys, ignoring their parents' warnings to stay in the courtyard, snuck out through the gate and found the ideal scooter course of smooth, sloping pavement that that made the scooter fly and the boys feel free. Freedom was, however, fleeting, for after they had each taken a few turns flying down the scooter course, they were confronted by a gang of Polish teenagers who surrounded them and took turns punching and kicking them, pinning Sam's arms back, smashing his beloved scooter against the pavement, wood shattering, bearings and wheels spinning in the street. With the gang members gloating, Sam wriggled from their grasp, scooped up the scooter's wheels and bearings, and sprinted, Josh at his side, both boys reaching the courtyard gate before the teens could finish beating them, the Jews, responsible for all their woes.

Two weeks later, on September 1, 1939, Sam forgot about his broken scooter when his father burst into the apartment, announcing that his company had closed and that Germany had invaded Poland. The Gingolds, witnesses of prior invasions, continued their daily routines, bartering for food, Leah, nine months pregnant, making cholent for Shabbat, praying for her second child to arrive and the Germans to leave. On September 20, 1939, her prayers were answered, but only half-way. Before dawn, Leah and Duvid rushed to the hospital, where Sam's brother, William, was born, the blessing of birth overshadowed by the bombs of the Luftwaffe, for Germany had not retreated, but had reached Warsaw, its murderous weapons aimed not at military installations, but at hospitals, schools, apartments and people. As the hospital walls where Leah gave birth imploded, Duvid and Leah, her baby swaddled in her arms, rushed home, told Sam to put on as many layers of clothing as he could, and they ran from the courtyard once deemed safe, as friends, neighbors, and buildings around them collapsed and crumbled. Leah, still bleeding, nursing her newborn, and Sam, age 6, kept running, avoiding the roads and listening for the whistling noise, the warning that another bomb was about to explode. For the next two weeks, crawling through the forest, ducking behind bushes and trees, Duvid led the family west, intent on reaching the Russian border and safety.

*When Sam was seven, the SS spotted him and assigned him the job of removing the dead infesting the streets and carting them to the ghetto's gates, to be discarded and stacked, first in trucks, then in massive pits.*

The Gingold family did not know that one month earlier, Russia had signed a pact with Germany and that the border was not a safe zone, but rather, a point of return, where Jews who had no money to bribe the Russian soldiers were loaded onto trucks, bound for the devastation from which they had fled. When they arrived back in Warsaw, the Gingolds were assigned a single room apartment in one of the buildings still standing, the room so small that if Sam wanted to turn in his sleep, he had to signal so that everyone could turn. Duvid was assigned a job cleaning the rubble and debris from the streets, and when the streets were clear, he was assigned the job of "bricking up" the ghetto, building walls between buildings, laying bricks across windows, doors, gates, and access points, barbed wire above the bricks, walling off the Jews, sealing off the ghetto, preventing escape.



Continued on page 6



Students from Humboldt Park School learn about Judaism at Congregation Shalom as a part of HERC's field trip program "From Ignorance & Fear to Knowledge & Understanding: Jews, Judaism, & the Holocaust"

*"I believe it is important to learn about the Holocaust because it is an important part of our history. We learn about our history in order to learn from our past and not make the same mistakes again. Learning about people and what we can do to one another is very scary, but can help us to come to a realization to stop. Stop spreading hate. Not just towards Jewish people, but everyone."*

— Student at Humboldt Park School in Milwaukee



## A Note from HERC's Education Committee Co-Chairs:

I am Mónica Olague-Marchán and I have the pleasure to co-chair the Nathan and Esther Pelz Holocaust Education Resource Center's Education Committee with the wonderful Jodi Habush-Sinykin. We are in awe of our committee members and their work. Their commitment to Holocaust education reminds me of my mother and a few nuns in the all-girls Catholic school I attended growing up in México. They pledged to never forgetting, or letting the young forget, the atrocities we humans can commit if we are not vigilant against our own biases, if we allow social events to the de-humanization of others and our own. George Santayana's "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" used to fill my heart with dread and doubt. Through the development of educational programs that promote and support other educators all around Wisconsin, the members of our committee directly and indirectly teach the lessons of the Holocaust to thousands of students every year. Their tenacity has turned my dread to hope, hope that is rooted in their courageous teaching of lessons too hurtful to tell and too telling to keep silent. HERC's educators, we salute you.

My name is Jodi Habush Sinykin, co-chair of the Education Committee of the Nathan and Esther Pelz Holocaust Education Resource Center together with my friend Monica Olague-Marchan. I feel proud and inspired by the remarkable group of educators from across our community, encompassing public and private, secular and religious schools, who comprise our committee. Each one of them brings a wealth of knowledge about Holocaust education and a shared commitment to teaching its lessons. I too believe that education remains our most powerful weapon against the intolerance and bigotry seemingly endemic to the human condition. Of the many lessons of the Holocaust, one that speaks to me most in today's treacherous times is the shameful part played by the multitude of bystanders in the years leading up to and encompassing the Shoah. I am hopeful that HERC's outstanding educational programs will shape the world view of people, young and old, in a way that inspires all of us to stand up to prejudice and injustice in whatever form it takes.



Mónica Olague-Marchán and Jodi Habush Sinykin, co-chairs of the Education Committee of the Nathan and Esther Pelz Holocaust Education Resource Center.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

NOVEMBER



### Sunday, November 17 Holocaust Stories at the Cathedral featuring Werner Richheimer

10:10 am | Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist

Join us as Werner Richheimer shares his story of survival during the Holocaust.

Co-Sponsor: Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist

### Sunday, November 17 Reflections on the Holocaust: Franklin Roosevelt, Immigration, and the Jews A Lecture by Dr. Tim Crain

3 pm | Sacred Heart Seminary & School of Theology

What was President Franklin D. Roosevelt's relationship with Jews and his response to their situation during the Holocaust? Nearly seventy-five years after World War II, a contentious debate lingers over whether FDR turned his back on the Jews of Hitler's Europe or saved millions of potential victims by defeating Nazi Germany.

Co-Sponsors: Lux Center for Catholic-Jewish Studies at Sacred Heart Seminary & School of Theology



### Wednesday, November 20 Passing on the Legacy Honoring Nancy Kennedy Barnett & Jim Barnett

6 pm | Wisconsin Club Country Club

Join HERC for a special evening as we honor Nancy Kennedy Barnett and Jim Barnett for their dedication to HERC and the community, featuring keynote speaker Dr. Deborah Lipstadt.

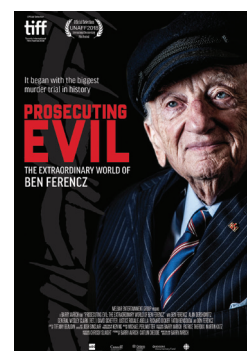


### Monday, November 25 "Prosecuting Evil" Film & Talk-Back

7 pm | Harry & Rose Samson Family JCC

A gripping profile of Ben Ferencz, the last surviving lead prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials whose lifelong desire for justice altered the rule of law. Talk-back led by Attorney Franklyn Gimbel.

Co-Sponsor: Harry & Rose Samson Family JCC



DECEMBER



### Sunday, December 15 Holocaust Stories: In their Honor featuring Ava Tevvs

10 am | Harry & Rose Samson Family JCC

Join us as Ava Tevvs shares her story of survival during the Holocaust.

Co-Sponsor: Harry & Rose Samson Family JCC



### Monday, November 18 "Miss Rose White" Film & Talk-Back

7 pm | Harry & Rose Samson Family JCC

During World War II, Reyzel Weiss escapes Poland and settles in America with her father Mordecai, believing that both her mother and her sister had become victims of the Holocaust. Talk-back led by Laurie Herman.

Co-Sponsor: Harry & Rose Samson Family JCC

## Unboxing Conversations about Antisemitism: How Deborah Lipstadt Continues to Amaze

By Dan Haumschild, Ph.D., HERC Director of Education



be rooted in or motivated by numbers or by antisemitic acts"; instead, "what should alarm us is that human beings continue to believe in a conspiracy that demonizes Jews and sees them as responsible for evil" (x). Indeed, as she suggests, "no healthy society harbors antisemitism—or any other form of hatred" (xi). Moreover, Lipstadt suggests that these foundational and ideological problems within a society should concern every member of that society: "when expressions of contempt for one group become normative, it is virtually inevitable that similar hatred will be directed at other groups" (xi). In short, the question of antisemitism is also a question about whether our society as we know it will survive or if it will be consumed by the intolerance and rigidity that hatred perpetuates.

The accessibility of *Antisemitism: Here and Now*, makes the invitation to this uncomfortable subject feel welcoming. Posited as a series of letters between herself and fictionalized amalgams of a student and a colleague, Lipstadt's book helps us to imagine conversations that go somewhere. Imbedded in this style the reader is still treated to her trademark rigor, academic precision, and imaginative gusto.

For example, at the beginning of Part IV, Lipstadt presents 'The Ominous Case of Salman Rushdie'. She reviews for the reader that Rushdie is both one of the most decorated novelists of the modern era and one of the most besieged. After Rushdie wrote *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed via fatwa—a legal and immutable assertion of Islamic law—that the book was blasphemous. Moreover, such a proclamation by the Ayatollah carried the weight of an execution order: Rushdie was to be killed on sight.

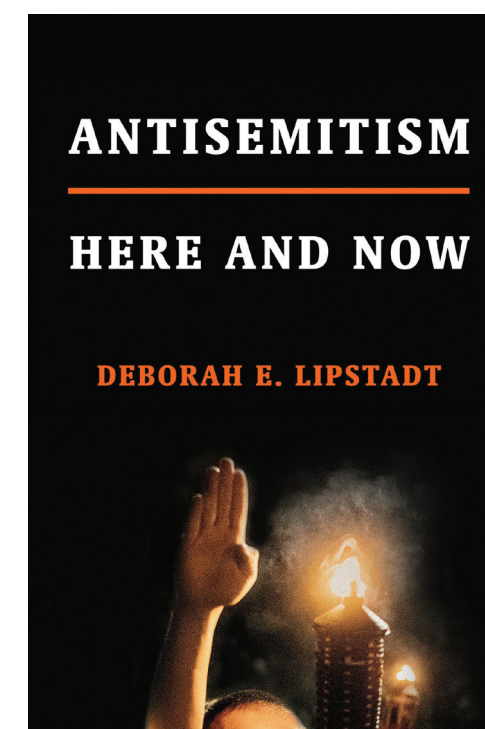
The public response that followed was illustrative of what Lipstadt calls 'yes, but' logic. Many suggested that yes, the order to kill Rushdie was wrong, but he shouldn't have written such an inflammatory book. 'The Ominous Case of Salman Rushdie' serves to crack open a discussion about how antisemitism is occasionally justified by pointing a finger at the actions of the State of Israel. She calls 'yes, but' logic "the top of the slippery slope of immoral equivalencies" (118).

Such imaginative and bold analogies are what make Lipstadt's book an ingenious intervention at the modern moment. Who but she could draw analogies between the tragic, deadly, and conflated response to Salman Rushdie and the tragic, deadly and conflated response to Israel? By offering such novel responses to antisemitism, at every level that one encounters it, Lipstadt's book thinks outside of the box and allows us to examine the box itself. In turn, these conversations never feel boxed in.

*Antisemitism: Here and Now* sounds off against the muted status quo of popular responses to intolerance since Charlottesville. Perhaps it is unsurprising that the cover of the book features a cropped photograph from that very same white nationalist rally. The picture was taken by New York Times photographer, Edu Bayer, and was featured at the head of a *Time Magazine* story that decried "Bigots Get a Boost from the Bully Pulpit." This image is where Lipstadt's book really begins. And her thoughtful letters address both the overamplified anger of the torch bearers and their opposition. At a time when shouting in either voice seems to contribute to our cultural deafness, this book offers a quiet, measured and innovative response.

By the end of the book, the reader may feel like Deborah Lipstadt's pen pal. The thoughtful rendering of her fictitious interlocutors allows everyone to compassionately see themselves in this book, searching for meaningful answers amidst the maze of questions. She invites each person to recognize the limitations of their own perspective and offers pathways that lead toward new, open spaces. With creativity, confidence, and calmness, Lipstadt gives us the blueprint for carrying out pressurized conversations with poise.

The flourishing of such conversations will be on full display at HERC's biennial fundraiser on November 20th, 2019, featuring none other than Deborah Lipstadt. As the keynote speaker, Lipstadt will offer insights that are sure to be transformative. Even as we celebrate, she will remind us that there is space to reimagine how we might move the needle forward.



Antisemitism is on the rise. Unfortunately, this is not breaking news. When the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation reported that 2018 constituted the "fifth consecutive year of increased incidents" or that there was a "20 percent increase from 2017," very few were surprised. Perhaps we've even begun to expect that this problem will grow incessantly and exponentially, as if it is the GDP or a pre-2008 IRA.

Even when we see more "troubling" news, like "the revival of old, hateful tropes of Jews as puppet-masters, working behind the scenes to destroy America through race-mixing and the nefarious use of power" (JCRC), most Americans can only muster a dampened response.

Why is it that such troubling trends can both garner so many headlines and generate so little action? I'll offer two answers among many that are plausible.

First, we have become inured to everything but the most exceptional. It was a mere two years ago that white nationalists marched on the streets of Charlottesville, chanting language reminiscent of Nazism. Today, such scenes have become almost normalized. Indeed, relative to other incidents of antisemitic violence, one may almost feel the childlike compulsion to respond to similar torch-wielding white supremacists with comments about sticks and stones.

But those scenes in Charlottesville were truly the stones that shattered our innocence. After hearing the angry chants that 'Jews will not replace us,' one could no longer look upon America as a safe space. And perhaps the nation realized with awful clarity that whenever we have done so in the past, we were simply fooling ourselves. So, statistics about rising antisemitism do not seem fantastic in either sense of the word. Statistics are neither visceral enough to compel us out of our ennui, nor do they complement the illusions that we once held so dear.

Second, perhaps the language that we use to both disseminate this information and respond to it has become rote, tired and stale. We expect the outrageous tweet and the outrageous response. When we hear reports of radical violence against a minority community, we already know what the next day's news cycle will be. We have gotten stuck in a rhetorical echo box.

Thus, many have become numb to the news and the reality that it attempts to convey.

Pushing against this modern malaise, Deborah Lipstadt's newest book, *Antisemitism: Here and Now*, is provocative in both form and content. In the first pages, she suggests an alternative approach, one that seeks to excavate the heart of hatred rather than simply batter around stories about the severity or extent of each hateful episode. She argues that, "our conversation should not

For more information contact:  
414-963-2710 | [HolocaustCenterMilwaukee.org](http://HolocaustCenterMilwaukee.org)



A look back...



A member of HERC's Board of Directors and Second Generation Speakers Bureau, Nancy Kennedy Barnett interviewed her cousin, Chicago Tribune journalist and accomplished author Howard Reich, about his conversations with Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel at the Harry & Rose Samson Family JCC in August.

PHOTO BY PAM BECKER



As part of HERC's May From Ignorance & Fear to Knowledge & Understanding: Jews, Judaism, & the Holocaust field trip to Congregation Emanu El B'ne Jeshurun, Rabbi Marc Berkson spoke about Judaism to 250 students from Frank Lloyd Wright International School in West Allis.



HERC, in partnership with the Harry & Rose Samson Family JCC and Cardinal Stritch University, was thrilled to bring to the community, for two weeks in April, the Wisconsin premier of The Last Cyclist, an absurdist play written in the Terezin ghetto by Karel Svenk in 1944 and re-constructed by Naomi Patz.



Former Mossad agent and curator of the exhibit Operation Finale: The Capture & Trial of Adolf Eichmann, Avner Avraham provided the insider story of the historic 1960 capture of Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann to both community members and students in March at Congregation Shalom.



In May Dr. Simon Carmel presented a fascinating overview of the experiences of deaf individuals during the Holocaust, including artist David Bloch at Congregation Emanu El B'ne Jeshurun and in partnership with the Wisconsin Association for the Deaf.



In April Elaine Culbertson and HERC Second Generation Speakers Bureau member Steven Russek spoke about their mothers, Dora and Dora, in their presentation Camp Sisters, Lager Shvester at Congregation Shalom.



On September 8 HERC Board member Matt Seigel interviewed Speakers Bureau member Dr. Renata Laxova about her experiences as a child rescued by Sir Nicholas Winton's kindertransport during the Holocaust. This interview was part of the Holocaust Stories at the Cathedral partnership with the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in Milwaukee.

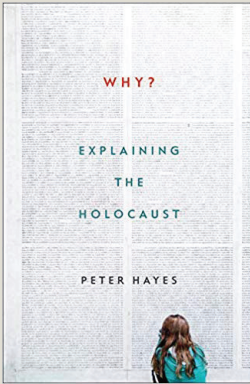


Students from the Hmong American Peace Academy participated in the From Ignorance & Fear to Knowledge & Understanding: Jews, Judaism, & the Holocaust field trip where they heard from Holocaust survivor and HERC Speakers Bureau member Howard Melton.



In September Dr. Kaja Finkler shared her story of survival with community members and interviewer Ben Merens at the Harry & Rose Samson Family JCC as part of the Holocaust Stories: In their Honor series.

...and ahead



On Wednesday, March 18, 2020 at 7 pm at the Harry & Rose Samson Family JCC, author Dr. Peter Hayes will speak about his most recent book Why? Explaining the Holocaust.



Christian Piccolini – an award-winning television producer, public speaker, author, peace advocate, and former white-supremacist – will speak about his work in helping people disengage from violence-based extremist groups at Congregation Shalom on Sunday, March 29, 2020 at 2 pm.



At 10 am on Sunday, April 26, 2020 at the Harry & Rose Samson Family JCC, Rebbetzin Feige Twerski will share with our community her experiences as a child during the Holocaust as part of the Holocaust Stories: In their Honor series.



# We Bear Witness: Jewish Heritage & Holocaust Fellowship In Memory of George Kennedy

By Jacob Thomas



Throughout the 2018-2019 academic year, I was part of the We Bear Witness Fellowship in honor of George Kennedy, supported by HERC and Hillel Milwaukee. In May, members of the Fellowship travelled to Germany and Poland to witness firsthand the devastation wrought by Nazi persecution of Jewish life and culture throughout Europe. Our education on the topic started right here at Hillel Milwaukee. Being an engineering student, who is neither Jewish nor familiar with Jewish culture prior to these classes, it was very hard for me to relate personally to the history and statistics that constituted my Holocaust education up to the Fellowship. I found myself using my engineering skills during these classes to give a more scientific and analytical approach to the discussions, such as addressing the winter cycles of frogs or certain industrial trends that were occurring during the era of the Holocaust. But, when we arrived in Berlin, the learning really started to hit home with me. I had previously been to Munich and have a minor in German Studies so I knew a fair amount about German culture, history, and language coming into the trip. Although my previous experience in Munich was eye-opening, it was nothing compared to learning about the events that unfolded in Berlin during the Nazi era.

Berlin was the home of the bureaucratic machine that extended its reach across Europe, manifesting as the extermination of Jewish life in every corner that it touched. We followed the trail of this destruction to Poland where the engineer in me finally understood the scale and severity of the events of

the second world war. Of the many stories that will shape my life and career there was one indelible anecdote, told by a survivor's grandson and a tour guide at Auschwitz-Birkenau. He spoke about the development of a type of furnace that was more efficient, could sustain higher levels of 'production', and was more acceptable to the local citizenry because it resulted in fewer fumes. This horrifying insight about my own field, driven mad by the ideology of the time, was offered next to the destroyed remains of the gas chambers and crematorium where the same furnaces were rusting away in the rubble. As an engineering student, I began to understand the granular detail of evil. At every point in the production of this new technology, engineers played a vital role. It made me wonder whether the engineers knew what they were doing at the time, whether they blocked out the reality so they could perform their jobs without question, or if they were forced to help industrialize the extermination. One thing was completely clear: engineers can attempt to isolate themselves in a completely detached, 'scientific' bubble, but our work always has repercussions. This is the realization I am now working hard to spread amongst my peers. We may train ourselves to focus on the statistics, the math, and the robotics of life, but we must always remember the lives that accompany these seemingly inert facts, numbers and equations. If we neglect this reality, we will continue to run the risk of merely building a better crematorium.



## Sam Gingold | Continued from front page

In the beginning, while the Germans were gathering data about the Jews, they provided meager rations or mush, but the longer the Jews survived, the tougher life became. The SS reduced rations to less than 180 calories per day and cut off the water supply as they continued to dump off more Jews collected from neighboring towns. The ghetto was overcrowded, and no water meant no washing or means to eliminate waste or lice that burrowed in scalps and multiplied. Typhus spread. Leah warned Sam to stay inside and be invisible, for anyone caught by the SS was forced to do backbreaking labor; those who were too slow or refused to work were shot, while the weak died from exhaustion and starvation.

At first, Sam passed time playing a game trying to catch and crush the lice burgeoning in his hair, but after he met his friend Daniel, an older man who had been dumped on the ghetto streets, Sam escaped by daydreaming about the beauty of Budapest that Daniel had left behind and described. When Sam was seven, the SS spotted him and assigned him the job of removing the dead infesting the streets and carting them to the ghetto's gates, to be discarded and stacked, first in trucks, then in massive pits. Leah implored her son to look at the feet, not the faces of the humanity he collected, but, one day, Sam forgot and recognized the face in his cart—Daniel and daydreams about Budapest lost in the madness of the job and the inconsolable grief of suffering and death.

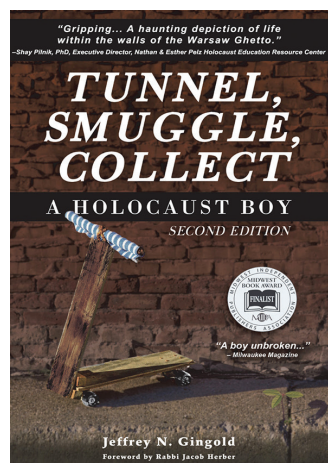
Realizing that they, not the Germans, must plan their fate, Duvid and Sam began sneaking out after midnight each night to a secret meeting place where some of the men planned their escape, Sam guarding the doorway. Each night, the men dug small tunnels beneath each building, never in a straight line, with the end point for a tunnel in one corner of a building and the beginning point for the next tunnel in the opposite corner. Sometimes the escape route was a small opening through the walls and sometimes through sewers, never using a straight route, ensuring more protection from the soldiers who guarded each building and gate and had contests to see who could shoot more escapees. Despite the danger, the men continued to dig, covering the passageways before dawn, then, wiping the clay and dust from the night's work and changing into their work clothes for the day's labor. Eventually, the men dug a path that led to the Catholic Cemetery just outside the ghetto walls.

To survive, the Jews smuggled food, but because the ghetto tunnels were too narrow for adults to pass through quickly, children became the smugglers. At age seven, Sam collected dead Jews by day and kept them alive, smuggling

food by night. The adults pooled jewelry, linens and whatever items they could find in a small satchel strapped to Sam's leg; he needed his hands free to push dirt from the tunnel out of his way and dig a new opening when the tunnel collapsed. When he got to the Catholic Cemetery, he waited for a signal, a stone thrown against a headstone, and then exchanged his goods with the Polish peasants for food.

By 1942, conditions in the ghetto were unbearable, and the Gingolds knew it was time to escape. They tried twice, stealthily inching their way through the tunnels, both times watching helplessly as the Jews before them were shot and killed, running back to the apartment, quickly changing their clothes for work before the Germans caught them. On the third attempt, they made it to the Catholic Cemetery outside the ghetto, lifted a headstone, crawled out from the tunnel and ran west, stopping at farms and barns for shelter, hiding in the woods, scavenging for left over potatoes and vegetables. The Gingold family survived in the wilderness for three months, sneaking at night, hiding by day, until they made it to the Russian border, and though the Russians, who had been invaded by Germany, were no longer colluding with the Nazis, they had no room for Jews, and the Gingolds were banished to a Siberian labor camp.

In Siberia, Duvid, chopped trees for the Russian war effort, and Leah sawed limbs for transport, her hands moving back and forth until friction wore off the outer layer of skin on her fingertips, leaving her with no fingerprints. In 1945, when Stalin announced that Jews could return to their native city, the Gingold family, with no home and no desire to return to Warsaw, traveled to the City of Szczecin, and from there, smuggled across the border to the displaced persons camp in Berlin, eventually immigrating to Milwaukee, where they buried their memories and assimilated, Sam raising three children who took for granted their security and freedom. In 2002, son Jeffrey, curious about his family's past, began interviewing his father and grandma, Leah. The interviews revealed such horrific pain that they remained sealed in tapes, stored in a box until Leah's death in 2008, when Jeffrey Gingold, author of the book, "Tunnel, Smuggle, Collect," realized he must tell his family's story, for history, whether hidden in a courtyard, sealed off by bricks, buried in a tunnel, or boxed on a shelf, leaves indelible prints that must be revealed and remembered.



# The Soap Myth Cleanses Our Souls

By Steven Moffic, M.D. and Randall Levin, M.D.

On April 29th, 2019, just two days after the antisemitic tragedy in a Synagogue near San Diego, a triumphal staged reading of the play The Soap Myth took place at Congregation Shalom in Milwaukee. It was written by acclaimed New York playwright Jeff Cohen, and starred the legendary actor Ed Asner. In a recent interview for BroadwayWorld, Mr. Cohen commented on recent tragic events in the Jewish community and the frightening rise of antisemitism. He observed: "Holocaust education is more important than ever. I feel a renewed urgency to fight the tide of hatred using the weapons I possess - words and ideas."



L to R: Jeff Cohen, Liba Vaynberg, Ed Asner, Ned Eisenberg, & Dee Pelletier

This play had been touring the country after a notable off-Broadway run. The spectacular reviews and sold-out audiences on its East Coast tour made The Soap Myth a great 'get' for Milwaukee. And in the midst of the rising tide of hatred, it asked important questions related to antisemitism and the Holocaust, including "who has the right to write history?" Resounding support for the project came from multiple corners. Both Shay Pilnik at HERC and Mr. Cohen welcomed the idea of bringing it to Milwaukee; and Rabbi Noah Chertkoff enthusiastically agreed to hold it at Congregation Shalom, thereby becoming a co-host for the event with HERC.

After much work by a team of coordinators the dramatic reading played to a fantastic audience despite an unforeseen challenge. Two days before his arrival in Milwaukee, Ed Asner suffered a leg injury from a fall in Dallas while receiving an award at the National Film Festival. But the 89-year-old award-winning actor would not be deterred from playing the role of Holocaust survivor, Milton Saltzman. Other cast members included Dee Pelletier, playing the duo roles of a Holocaust scholar, Esther Feinman, and a Holocaust denier, Brenda Goodsen; Drama Desk Award-Winner, Ned Eisenberg, playing various roles; and Liba Vaynberg, as the journalist Annie Blumberg.

The Soap Myth is a complex story that cuts right to the core of history's power by engaging the contentious claim that the Nazi war machine made soap from the remains of human beings. Jeff Cohen makes clear that the specifics of soap should not be considered the point of the show, but rather a vehicle that draws out what mankind is capable of doing to itself through hatred and denial. Ed Asner's portrayal of the Holocaust survivor is poignant in part because his motivating principle is simple: convince others that "such a thing" did happen. But, in a world that gives credence to deniers and gives precedence to historians who only document that which can be documented, this simple task becomes Herculean.

This challenged the audience with many important questions, including:

- Was it possible that the Nazis made soap out of the human fat of Jews?
- Whose memory could and can be trusted?
- What could be truthful about the memory of a lone Holocaust survivor who was sure that the soap myth was a reality?
- How should we respond to deniers of the truth, whether that be Holocaust deniers or current political "alternative facts"?
- How can we all remain open to new information that counters what we already believe?

On the night of the show, over 550 people in Congregation Shalom were asked such questions. The audience consisted of many members of the Jewish community, and many others from the wider Milwaukee community. In the Q & A, we even heard from a local non-Jewish psychiatrist whose father sounded like a "righteous gentile" during the time of the Holocaust. A security guard and others conveyed that the evening's events were "life changing." Indeed, it isn't hard to imagine that everyone in attendance was touched personally in some way. Even if you weren't there, the ripple effects may reach you one way or another.

That it was a staged reading allowed all to feel the "true" emotion and pain being exhibited, without the distraction of scenery or costuming. The variety of important issues discussed in the play set the stage to further discuss them in other formats. Honoring Holocaust survivors, their stories, and their families will continue. That this was done so successfully should lead to producing other related theatrical events, as well as other innovative modalities that we haven't done yet in Milwaukee.

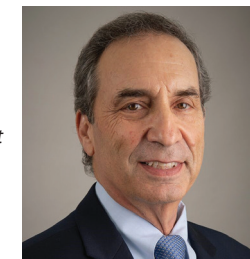
For these authors, the surreal progression of the night felt like A Field of Dreams: if you produce it, they will come. These dreams can come true if you work to make them a reality and have good people help you along the way. We all have something important that needs to be heard and our dream set the stage for these stories to be told. Those who wish to deny important truths need to be confronted by a community who can come together for each other in a safe environment in a frightening time. As this dream unfolded at Congregation Shalom, it became a moment when we could experience the support of non-Jews, allies that can help us address the rise of antisemitism.

Whether originally intended or not, this was our response to the tragedy in San

Diego. Education, edification, and enlightenment. Our community always seems to respond to losses with resilience. As it turned out, then, this event was much more than a great dramatic reading. It felt more like a community healing service. This was quite evident when an audience member stood up and mentioned that she was a survivor and the entire audience responded with applause. We were all one family at that point.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Both Drs. Levin and Moffic are physicians, best friends, attend Torah Study, devoted to their families, and retired from their clinical work in direct patient care. They have also been involved in serving their communities in various ways, including wellness for physicians and healing in the Jewish - and wider - community.



Randall Levin, M.D.



Steven Moffic, M.D.

Specifically, Randall Levin, M.D. is an Emergency Physician, who now is Chair of the Wellness Section of the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP). At Congregation Shalom, he has led the development of the weekly and long-running "What's Nu?" discussion group, and tutors students from the Our Next Generation (ONG) program. He played the essential role in bringing Soap Myth to Milwaukee and shepherded its production to completion. This production was dedicated to Randy and Fay's son Jordan who, along with his wife Susie, helped sponsor the program in "Loving Memory of Jordan's Maternal Grandparents".

Steven Moffic, M.D., is a psychiatrist who, in his work to serve the underserved, received the one-time Hero of Public Psychiatry from the American Psychiatric Association (APA). Guided by Tikkun Olam, he is currently active professionally in addressing physician burnout, climate instability, and antisemitism, especially in regards to his birth and our Holocaust. His community service includes serving on the boards and committees of the Jewish National Fund (JNF), Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC), and Milwaukee's Jewish Community Center (JCC), where he is co-chair with his wife Rusti of Tapestry, the Arts & Ideas Programs.

# In Memory of Jordan Levin



L to R: Susan Levin, Jordan Levin z"l, Dana Levin, & Randall Levin

In our preparations for hosting the Milwaukee premiere of the Soap Myth, featuring the most honored male performer in the history of Primetime Emmy Awards Ed Asner, the HERC and Congregation Shalom team had the fortune of working with Jordan Levin z"l, who passed away on July 29th, 2019. In Jordan's involvement in this unforgettable theatrical reading, both he and his father Randy

accompanied us at every step of the way. Setting an example to other lay leaders in our community, they showed tremendous dedication to the program's planning and execution and doing so under the most difficult circumstances one could imagine. More than anything, it was Jordan and his wife Susan's decision to be the lead sponsors of the program, recognizing it as perhaps their last opportunity as a couple to give back to our community, that particularly touched the leadership and staff of both HERC and our partners at Congregation Shalom.